To His Coy Mistress

1 Had we but world enough, and time,

2 This coyness, lady, were no crime.

3 We would sit down, and think which way

4 To walk, and pass our long love's day.

5 Thou by the Indian Ganges' side

6 Shouldst rubies find; I by the tide

7 Of Humber would complain. I would

8 Love you ten years before the Flood,

9 And you should, if you please, refuse

 10 Till the conversion of the Jews.

11 My vegetable love should grow

12 Vaster than empires, and more slow;

13 An hundred years should go to praise

14 Thine eyes, and on thy forehead gaze;

15 Two hundred to adore each breast,

16 But thirty thousand to the rest;

17 An age at least to every part,

18 And the last age should show your heart.

19 For, lady, you deserve this state,

20 Nor would I love at lower rate.

21 But at my back I always hear

22 Time's wingèd chariot hurrying near;

23 And yonder all before us lie

24 Deserts of vast eternity.

25 Thy beauty shall no more be found,

26 Nor, in thy marble vault, shall sound

27 My echoing song; then worms shall try

28 That long-preserved virginity,

29 And your quaint honour turn to dust,

30 And into ashes all my lust:

31 The grave's a fine and private place,

32 But none, I think, do there embrace.

33 Now therefore, while the youthful hue

34 Sits on thy skin like morning dew,

35 And while thy willing soul transpires

36 At every pore with instant fires,

37 Now let us sport us while we may,

38 And now, like amorous birds of prey,

39 Rather at once our time devour

40 Than languish in his slow-chapped power.

41 Let us roll all our strength and all

42 Our sweetness, up into one ball,

43 And tear our pleasures with rough strife

44 Thorough the iron gates of life.

45 Thus, though we cannot make our sun

46 Stand still, yet we will make him run.

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Living Life

“People only have one life to live” and “guys only want one thing and that one thing is sex”are two well-known phrases that are very different on the surface, but familiar at the same time. Many women are constantly putting men into the typical stereotype of wanting sex and only sex. When people want others in life to do certain things or participate in a particular event and that person willingly refuses for one reason or another, people will more often than not say something like “life is short” or “people only have one life to live” in order to persuade the person to participate. Combine that persuasion with the woman’s sex stereotype of men; Andrew Marvell’s “To His Coy Mistress” poem fits that combination of phrases. “To His Coy Mistress” makes use of tone, imagery, and alliteration to highlight the importance of living life to its fullest potential and making it last because life is short.

“To His Coy Mistress” is broken down into three stanzas, each of which has a shifting tone. The tone throughout this poem builds on the speaker’s argument as it begins with insincere romance and flows into passionate, violent lust. Phrases such as “our long love’s day,” “love you ten years,” “love should grow” and “show your heart” from lines one through twenty in the first stanza create a romantic tone that begins the poem romantically . The long years of love indicate that the speaker has a sincere love and desire to be with this woman. The speaker wants to admire each and every aspect of his lover until finally reaching her heart. All of this may seem sincere, until the second part of the initial tone comes into play with phrases such as “but world enough,” “time,” “hundred years,” “two hundred to adore each breast,” and “age at least” in lines one through twenty of the first stanza. These groups of words put a major emphasis on the time it would take to actually love her and admire all aspects of her body, soul, and mind. Here, the romance becomes insincere because the speaker feels that is a waste of time, and that the two of them would be wasting valuable time if they engaged in such actions. As the poem continues, the speaker reveals his true desires with regards to his lover.

Throughout the second stanza, the speaker seems to be more sincere, because he now admits to what he really wantsand uses words such as “time’s wingèd chariot hurrying near,” “all before us lie,” “vast eternity,” “no more be found,” “dust,” and “ashes,” in lines twenty one to thirty two to create a negative, urgent tone. The speaker uses time and age as obstacles and gives them negative implications when comparing them to graves, dust, and ashes. Here, sex is the main goal of the speaker, and he attempts to use this urgent tone to lure his lover into complying with his desires. He argues that everything will go to waste if the two of them do not act presently. At the end of this stanza, the speaker seemingly becomes impatient and sincerely urges his lover to have sex with him.

The speaker finally lets all of his emotions flow, now pushing forward violently. Short, passionate phrases such as “willing soul transpires,” “instant fires,” “like amorous bird of prey,” “roll all our strength,” and “tear our pleasures,” in lines thirty three to forty six create a violent tone that is full of lust. The speaker cannot take it anymore, and turns his romanticism into roughness “like amorous birds of prey” (38). The coyness of his mistress, the old age factor (time constantly banging at their door), and the speaker’s undeniable desire for sexual interaction with his lover transform him into a violent luster. Obviously his patience has run short, and he is desperately attempting to make a valid argument in his favor. Overall, the romantic, insincere, negative, urgent, and lustful tones allow this giant “pick-up line” to flow smoothly. The style of this stanza is a great indication of how spectacular a person’s life can be. Life should “flow smoothly,” or in other words, enjoy life and seize the moment while the chance still exists.

The poem also uses imagery to strengthen the various tones that presented themselves throughout the poem. In stanza number one, the numerous images serve to bring the speaker’s mistress to a state of imagination, a peaceful imagination. The rivers, like the “Indian Ganges” (5), precious “rubies” (6), and great empires are far more impressive than the scenery that surrounds the two of them. These ideas give the mistress a sense of romance in which the speaker is interested. These initial images that enhance the tone serve to relay the information that people often want to do something with their lives, but they will generally be hesitant. The speaker urges people away from being hesitant with his redundant theme of time. Moving into the second stanza, the darkened images really bring out the negativity of the speaker’s urgent tone. The speaker so desperately desires sexual interactions that he sarcastically says the “grave’s a fine and private place” (31) where she can “lie” (23) with “worms” (27) while all the lust turns to ashes. These depressing images shed light to the reality of what could happen if they don’t engage in sex very soon. This translates into everyday life; waiting can be deadly because if we do not seize the moment, everything, including life, will completely go to waste. So, the speaker says, we should delve into our passion and give it everything we have! Rough and hardened images throughout the final stanza reinforces the speaker’s violently passionate tone. The earlier argument of time is now pushed to its limits, for the speaker can wait no longer. He wishes, like “instant fires” (36), that they “sport” (37) “like amorous birds of prey” (38).Here, the speaker’s images are of fiery passion, implicating that he has let all emotions overcome him, and they should make love. This final stanza of images links to people’s lives, demanding that they experience more than just an average lifestyle. Imagery successfully develops and enhances the tone while bringing the overall theme of “To His Coy Mistress” to life.

The musical device, alliteration, serves to enhance the poem’s overall effect. This device ties together important lines, adds beauty, and adds a quickened pace to the poem. The first stanza and the last stanza are full of alliteration. The first stanza uses alliteration with the words “we, world,” (1) “We, would, which,” (2) “long, love’s,” (4) “thirty, thousand,” (16) and “should, show” (18). The “wuh,” “luh,” “thh,” and “shh” sounds pick up the direction that this first stanza is headed. The first stanza calls attention to action and events that occur in life that people may not seize and take the opportunity to experience. These events can be wonderful experiences, and they can bring joy to life. As the imagery and tone throughout the second stanza creates a depressive and negative mood, the positive alliteration is absent. The poem comes to a conclusion with a bang of alliteration. The final two lines effectively finish the poem with alliterations such as “Thus, though,” (45) “Stand, still,” (46) and “we, will” (46). As alliteration gives this poem a quickening pace, these “thh,” “st,” and “wuh” sounds that flow smoothly throughout each line reemphasizes the speaker’s violent lust and passion for his mistress. With the quickened pace, the poem dives into the desired action of sex; people need to seize the moment and dive into something new, adventurous, and eventful.

On the surface, Andrew Marvell’s “To His Coy Mistress” is about a man who begins to set up a romantic mood and scene for his mistress, but he does so insincerely. He then attempts to use time as an excuse as to why they should proceed with his lustful desires. Finally, he lets all control loose and goes for the grand finale. However, this poem has much more to offer than a general stereotype of men. Alliteration, imagery, and tone reveal the deeper meaning embedded in this masterpiece. These literary devices urge people to step out of that confining box that restricts them from experiencing life to its fullest. Sometimes, people must take a risk. The dark imagery in stanza two reveals what life will be like if lived too cautiously. When given an opportunity to step over the edge, seize that moment for if people pass it by, they will forever wonder about the enjoyment, excitement, and life experiences that they could have been a part of.

Works Cited

Marvell, Andrew. “To His Coy Mistress.” Perrine’s Literature: Structure, Sound, and Sense. Eds. Thomas R. Arp, Greg Johnson. Boston Massachusetts, USA: Thomson/Wadsworth Publishing, 2006. 730.

